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A SERMON

ON THE DEATH OF

PRESIDENT GARFIELD,

PREACHED IN THE

FIRST CHURCH OF HARTFORD.

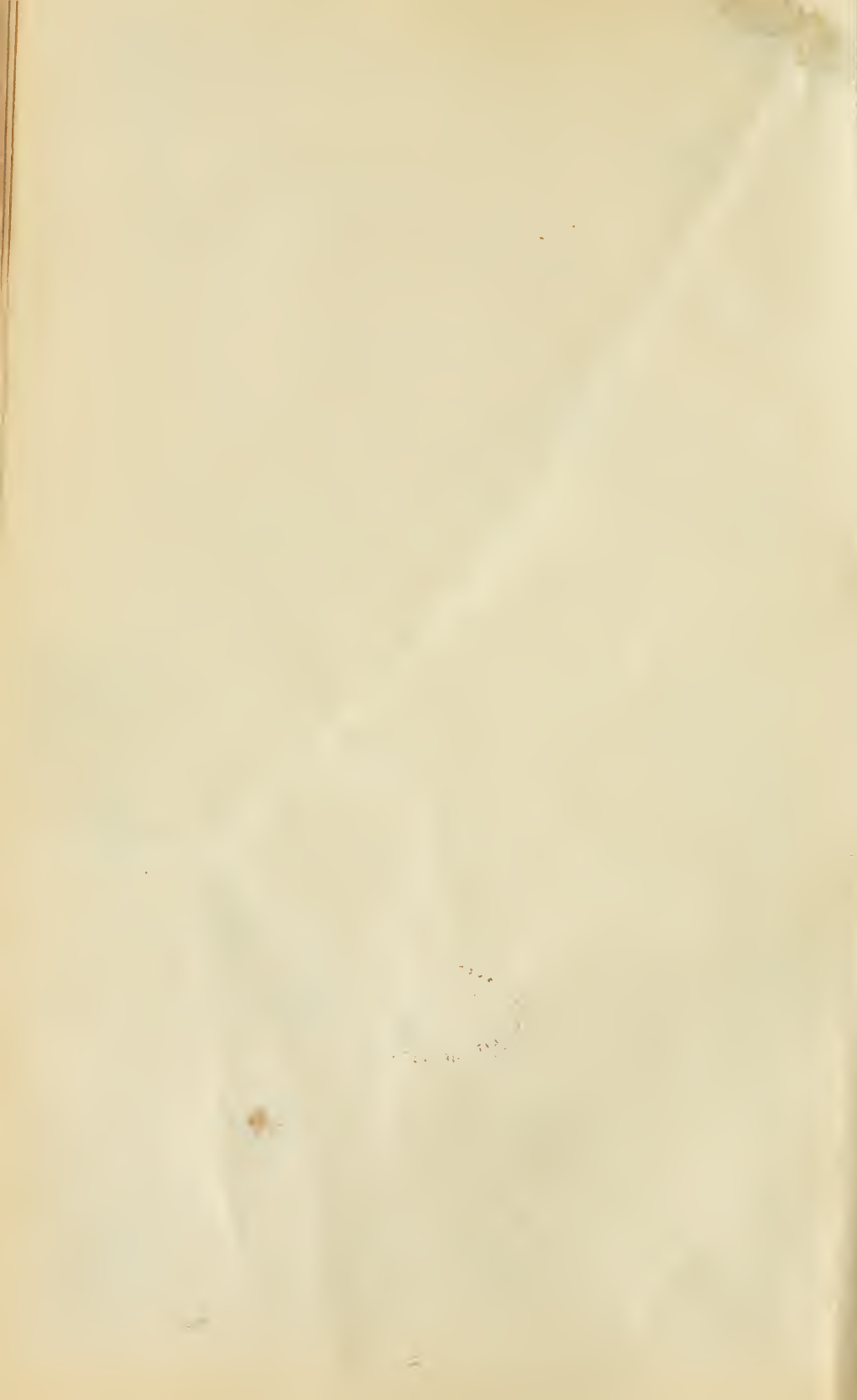
BY

GEO. LEON WALKER,

PASTOR.

SEPTEMBER 25, 1881.





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“Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils.” . . .
“His breath goeth forth ; he returneth to his earth : in that
very day his thoughts perish.”

How solemnly these words utter themselves in our hearing to-day, sounding out of the cloud which darkens all the land ! The frailty and vanity of human power ; the might and mystery of mortality ; the greatness and awfulness of Divine Providence ; how they echo and reverberate in the events which crowd upon the Nation's thoughts this funereal Sabbath morning !

And what a tremendously added emphasis do these facts and monitions derive from the sharpness of that contrast between what *seemed* less than seven short months ago, and what indubitably *is* to-day !

Not seven months ago a man in the full vigor of physical and intellectual strength stood up at our National Capitol and took the oath of office as President of fifty millions of people : to-day a flying car has just borne along the lines of one of our inland railways a shrunken and mutilated form, to be deposited in six narrow feet of Ohio burial-ground.

Not seven months ago there was committed to this man, by virtue of the office to which the nation had called him, the supreme executive functions of a government equal in power and responsibility to any

on earth: to-day the emaciate hand is as void of strength and of authority as any subject of an almshouse funeral.

Not seven months ago the Land congratulated itself with having called to the foremost post of public leadership a distinguished citizen, already tried on many a field of civil and military enterprise,— a man probably better endowed with the varied resources of acquired intellectual furnishment than any other who had ever occupied his office; and trusted that under his guidance the nation was to be led in an onward and upward pathway of prosperity and honor: to-day, instead of following his inspiring and compelling leadership, all that there is left to those who would so eagerly have trod in the pathway he should pioneer is to gather up his poor relics, and bury them under the green sward from human sight forever.

Yes, so far as the outward and visible life and career of the man James Abram Garfield is concerned,— the man but a few hours ago President of the Republic; Commander of the National Army and Navy; Fountain and distributor of public office and recompense; Head and embodiment of our civil fabric and commonwealth,— all is over.

In silence and in tears the whole land this Sabbath morning stands wondering and mourning over the event. Quite impossible is it to turn our thoughts to-day to any other theme than that which the providence of God so distinctly forces upon us. The greatness of the stroke; the vast consequences which may flow from it; the very considerable consequences which have already come from the preliminary incidents which have led on to this event of mortality;

the sense of personal loss and bereavement which each one of us feels, and above all, the remembrance that this is no accident, but a part of God's direct dealings with us, all conspire to make it proper and necessary that this first Sabbath of our sorrow should not go by without an attempt, at least, to bring ourselves into a proper position to begin in some measure to understand the meanings of this great affliction.

Into any extended biography of the life, or analysis of the character, of James Abram Garfield it is quite unnecessary for me now to enter. Everybody here knows already the simple and, on the whole, the noble and lovely story. Parents in coming generations will tell their children about their knees of this poor boy, the youngest of a family of four, brought up upon an Ohio clearing, and trained to axe and hoe. They will tell how he worked his way through school and academy; toiling through midsummer days and winter evenings to secure money to pay his little tuition bills. How a college education became a passion to him; and how, by industry and self-sacrifice, he won his way in 1856, at the age of twenty-five, to a graduate's diploma at Williams and a debt of four hundred and fifty dollars. How then he taught school; and found soon after the greatest prize and blessing which was ever to come to him (however so many were to be his honors) in the love and truth of Lucretia Rudolph, his now widowed wife. How at the outbreak of the war, in 1861, he entered the Union army, and fought bravely, leaving the army as a major-general. How he resigned his commission at the express request of Abraham Lincoln to enter the House of Representatives to support the government in Congress. How,

from that time to the summer of 1880 he continued in Congress, unquestionably the best-read man in it, and uniformly one of the leaders of thought and legislation during the debates and controversies and reconstructions of these eighteen laborious years. How at a national political convention in June 1880 he was, unexpectedly but with vast enthusiasm, nominated for the Presidency, and in November of the same year was elected. How in March 1881 he was sworn into this supreme office of the nation before the gathered dignities of the land, and in the presence of his grey-headed old mother, whose faith in her "boy James" had been the support of his youth, and at that hour was the crown of his manhood. How through all this long period he had maintained the character of an able, lovable, studious, modest, and christian man; a helper of the needy and a soldier of the Cross. How, if erring sometimes in judgment, and perhaps through over-compliance in friendships led into mistakes, he left no occasion to question the integrity of his purposes and the unselfishness of his aims. How on the morning of July 2d he was shot down by a miserable, vagrant office-seeker; a man whose mind seems less to be deranged than never to have been arranged; a compound of vanity, duplicity, knavery, and greed. How through eleven weeks and upward he lay a helpless and declining invalid; a cheerful and courageous sufferer; ministered to as no son of Adam was ever ministered to before, and watched with a solicitude and attention by a waiting nation and an anxious world, such as no crowned monarch ever knew, and such as is absolutely unparalleled in all the story of the human race. How, at last, on Monday September 19th, he died, and how the nation wept,

and other lands sorrowed in unison, — this will be the simple, romantic, noble story parents will tell their children in years and generations to come, for their inspiration and cheer. You know it all. Every newspaper of our land amplifies and augments it, with pleasing incident and illustrative anecdote. So we need dwell no longer upon this.

Turning now to some reflections which arise in view of this event, in whose presence the nation reverently bares its head and puts off its sandals to-day, the first suggestion which seems forced upon us is the mystery and sovereignty of Providence.

However we may recognize the guilt and responsibility of the wretched human actor in the tragedy of our President's death, it is impossible to stop there. The heart cannot stop there. The mind cannot stop there. The nation has not stopped there. With an instinct universal in human nature in every age, an instinct which refuses to be misled by any quibbles of purblind half-reason, men's hearts and minds in this event move straight on to the recognition of God's hand in it.

The Providence of God has ordered what has befallen us. The old Hebrew, clear in his convictions of God's absolute righteousness, but equally clear in his recognition of God's all-pervading sovereignty, felt no contradiction in terms when he said, "Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" Nor is there contradiction. Inexplicable as are the links which unite the responsibility of man and the ordinance of God, we feel in every crisis hour of life, either personal or public, that God's hand rules in the event in which we trace also a human agency. And so to-day, and in all the weary, anxious, hoping,

despairing, supplicating days of the past eleven weeks the people of the land have felt, as they have seldom felt before, brought face to face with God's sovereign and irresistible providence. And how irresistible and supreme that Providence is! What a testimony to it in the unforeseeableness and triviality of the means it employs to do its bidding! That morning of the second of July rose sweet and hopeful on the President and his household, on the nation and its interests. Harassed by his routine endeavors to satisfy the clamorous seekers for office which had thronged his doors for four months (and had not foreborne to hold him on the rack of their importunity even through the nearly fatal illness of his wife), the President took that July morning as the commencement of a little sorely-needed outing and holiday.

When Caesar was assassinated the sacred fowls are said to have given signs of approaching trouble, and soothsayers sent him warnings. When William of Orange was shot down there were those who remembered or thought they remembered unusual portents in the sky. But it was on the sweet morning of a pleasant holiday that providential destiny encountered and shattered our President. And that Providence came in no august and Heaven-suggesting shape. It came in the shape of a shambling, scant-clad lounge about the railway train, and a second-hand pistol, cowardly shot from behind his back. Nor was the act (as when Lincoln fell) an act which could be regarded as the culmination and embodiment of a representative movement or purpose, antagonistic to the man or the principle he represented. On the contrary, it seems the purely personal conception of an individual ungoverned brain; of which no possible

sagacity could be forewarned; against which, for its very viewlessness and improbability, it was impossible to provide. But it was sufficient for the purpose, as the instrumentalities of Providence always are. The wounded President exclaimed (as the instinctive burst of exigent calamity so often exclaims) "My God," and fell senseless to the floor. Yes, the exclamation was true. Past the cowering assassin he looked, and we needs must look, to the irresistible might of Divine providence.

What a witness, too, to the irresistibleness of that Providence comes to us—not alone in the triviality and unexpectedness of the means used to bring the event about—but in the bafflement and error of the high medical skill which with so intent and consecrated endeavor has striven to avert the appointed result! No right-minded man in an hour like this inclines to breathe a word of criticism on the skill of the devoted men who have stood with all the appliances of their science between the President and the grave, vainly endeavoring to bar his way thither.

But surely it is a memorable comment on the fallibility of what is supposed to be the highest skill and experience, and a striking testimony to the impossibility of defeating a Divine design, that six or seven eminent surgeons were left to probe for eleven weeks a channel which the bullet never entered, and to hunt for and locate the ball in a spot toward which, even, it never went.

Yes, Providence is great and irresistible. The thing determined upon is accomplished. He has his way "in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth. None can stay his hand or say unto him, What doest thou!" It becomes us to recognize

and humble ourselves before the bared hand of Almighty God.

Another suggestion which rises to the mind on this occasion is prompted by the fact that President Garfield is the second President of our Republic who has fallen by the hand of Assassination.

From time to time in the world's past, all through human history, assassination has been a not unfrequent resort of injured or malignant weakness against arbitrary power. In Asia and in Europe alike, the violent taking off of a sovereign is a common way of attempting to redress public wrong. Probably the annals of no European government of any considerable continuance but afford illustrations of attempts made on their ruler's lives. The histories of some of them, like those of Russia and France, give examples over and over again. It passed into a proverb long ago that "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." And it is undoubtedly owing to the sort of fellow-feeling which this apprehension among rulers awakens, that we must attribute some considerable portion, at least, of those expressions of sympathy in our President's violent death which have come from the crowned heads and courts of Europe. Assassination is a sore point of contemplation over there. A noticeable apprehension of it has grown with the later days even of the popular and christian British Queen; and increasing precautions to secure her safety have been nervously required by her on her journeys year by year.

But we, in this Republican land, have not hitherto reckoned assassination as among the considerable perils of our civil government. The violent taking off of Lincoln did not seem to be a case to be particularly accounted of, it was so manifestly connected with, and expressive of, the great civil conflict of the nation.

But the death of President Garfield shows that Republicanism is no panacea against the violent hand of the spirit of regicide. We have enacted here a democratic form of government, but a democratic form of government proves to be in itself no security for the life of its administrator. Indeed, the very democracy of our government and its habit of opening the channels of office to the rabblement of common solicitation, seems to have been the very occasion of the introduction of this old-world terror of rulers into our body politic.

We have not a Utopia by having a Republic. Human nature is not changed by ability to cast a vote.

Plainly in the interest of public order, as well as the safety of our elected rulers, some added securities must be devised to guard the life of our Presidents, and to ward off from them the pressure of that popular clamor and demand for political office and reward, which can so easily pass over into personal malice; and which in the present terrible case seems to be the only explicable hypothesis of Guiteau's great crime. We cannot afford to forget the lesson of two Presidential assassinations in twenty years. The swarming masses of lawless internationalists and communists poured into our land from foreign shores are a dangerous element. And we breed enough such at home. And when on a Harvard College platform, at an annual commencement, the most eloquent orator of America openly advocates "daggers and dynamite" as under any circumstances appropriate political weapons, it is high time that men who are sane even if not eloquent, consider what means must be devised to reform our civil service, not only in the interest of general purity of administration, but of safety to our

elected rulers. Fortunately one agency which can be appealed to bring about this end is that sentiment which has been so conspicuously manifested by the American people these eleven weeks past—the sentiment of loyalty to the President as President. For this sentiment has in this period given a wonderful disclosure. Loyalty used to be supposed to be the peculiar tie which bound the subject of a monarchy to his hereditary lord. One of the good things shown by the past months of watching by Garfield's sick-bed is that it is a tie which can equally bind a citizen of a republic to its elected head.

Very much, doubtless, of the solicitude and sympathy the nation has felt has been for Garfield as a man; but vastly more has been for Garfield as the chosen and rightful President. It was because the President was assailed; because the President was sick, because the President was likely to die, that men were astonished and aggrieved. It is because it is the President who died that they will demand that the temptations and the perils of his office be made less. The suffrages of the people confers a sacredness from assault. The reception of "most votes" awakens a loyalty to the man who has them, equal to that divinity which in other lands is supposed to hedge a king.

Another impressive aspect of the event we sorrow over to-day demands our notice.

This is the effect of our President's assassination, and especially of his long sickness and patient suffering, in enkindling the sentiment of national and international sympathy and brotherhood. It is quite within the bounds of soberness to say that a parallel instance to this fullness of fellowship in one man's

suffering and death was never before known in the history of the race. In the death of Abraham Lincoln the people of the North were as profoundly, perhaps more profoundly, moved and overwhelmed. But the South, except the colored race who loved him as a father, did not sympathize in the sorrow. In the death of Mr. Lincoln a considerable part of the English people were touched with a tardy but a sincere regret. The press and the society, of that mother-land which stood so long aloof from us, which launched pirates to prey upon our commerce, and cast guns to sink our ships, came, at last, in the martyrdom of our President, to feel and express a real sympathy.

But in this case, no prejudice anywhere has chilled the fresh outflow of universal emotion. The homes of the South have been one with the homes of the North, in having through all their households these many weeks past this uppermost solicitude, "How is the suffering President?" Men who voted for Garfield have not been appreciably or actually different from men who voted for Hancock in the intensity of this affectionate interest. Party feeling has for the moment been forgotten. Religious differences have been unregarded. Sectional oppositions have not come to mind. The metropolitan press and the frontier newspaper; the New York stock-board and the Nevada grocery have alike made their theme of record and anxious watch the variations of one man's pulse and the heaving of a single human breast. The solicitude of fifty millions of Americans has been as unintermitting and as keen as if each almost was a brother born. The Nation has stood by the bedside. The Land has watched with him through the nights. The Country has taken no more respite from its care

than the indefatigable chief-physician in charge of the patient's case. It has been the one great theme of conversation, hope, and prayer the whole land through.

And other lands have felt with us. Courts of ancient monarchies have made our President's condition the theme of enquiry and uttered hope. The depths of the ocean have been alive with messages of transmitted sympathy and sorrow. The sable insignia of mourning ordered by the Queen of England, and Kings of Holland and Spain, to be worn by their respective Courts as for a brother monarch of Europe, bespeak more than an official grief. There can be no question that the sympathy is human and sincere.

This awakening of fellowship in our land and in other lands is something to be thankful for. It is, indeed, something over which it is easy to gush and grow extravagant. A good deal of extravagance will doubtless find public utterance on this matter to-day. Many pulpits to-day will speak, and many orators to-morrow will declaim, as if this hush of partisanship at home, and this response of sympathy from abroad, were a pretty sure token of the millennium at hand. It is not quite so. The political Ethiopian does not so easily change his skin, or the office-hunting leopard his spots, as this implies. England is still a good way off, and has very positive interests and prejudices which will not wash out in a few sympathetic tears.

Let us not unwisely make too much of this; and yet, equally, let us not unwisely fail to make as much of it as we should. It is a sweet, a noble, and an auspicious thing. It has in it an encouragement and a prophecy. It looks toward—though it still may be at a far remove, and over mountains which lie

between — but it looks toward a time when the land shall be in all its length and breadth in brotherhood, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, but shall dwell together in lasting peace.

And the fact that the President's sickness and death has brought about a kind of shadow and prefiguration of that time, must be regarded as a very fortunate circumstance of his personal career, and as going a considerable way, if justification were necessary, toward justifying the providential ordering of this his suffering and mortality.

For it must be candidly admitted, that apart from this kind of passive accomplishment (through his pain and death) of the fusion of our land in fellowship, Mr. Garfield's career would have been one rather of promise than of completed achievement.

Very different in this respect of promise and of accomplishment is the career of Mr. Garfield from that of Mr. Lincoln, with whom, because of the similarity of their taking off, it is so natural to compare him. To Mr. Lincoln was given the felicity of a substantial completion of a great life of active accomplishment. Long-laboring, long-tried, he at last fulfilled. He lived to see Lee's surrender, the Union's establishment, the Nation saved. And then on the Pisgah-top of an accomplished enterprise; the summit than which no higher was, he died. It was a life of grandest endeavor and consecration, ending at the very moment and goal of grandest success.

Not exactly thus is it with the life whose ending we mourn to-day. As soldier and as congressman, as legislator and as scholar, Mr. Garfield had done enough and nobly for the stations which he filled. But as President he had opportunities before him, and a possi-

bility of good to do, which his death, had it occurred when he was shot, on the second of July, would have left almost wholly unembraced and unfulfilled. How he would have accomplished, we can only conjecture and believe. But his survival through these long weeks of suffering may (in another way) have wrought all, and it may be more than all, that his life would have done. That rounds out his life in a nobler accomplishment than perhaps his survival would. That makes a benign wholeness in his active and in his passive achievement, which even the most confident believer in his powers might well hesitate to mar by the choice instead for him of four or eight years in the presidential chair. Even a life so rich and prophetic of noble things as his may, perhaps, have been wisely poured out in the passive accomplishment of what his suffering has wrought. The providence may be already justified. God may not have dealt parsimoniously, even for Garfield's earthly utility and human fame.

I am naturally led, by this last suggestion which has been made, to one more aspect of the event which occupies the world's attention to-day, and one perhaps more important in its lasting interest than any other. This is that aspect of the event which is presented to us when we think of these protracted weeks of earnest and general prayer for the President's recovery, terminated only by his death.

I have called this the "most important aspect" of the whole matter, and it is so. For just so much as spiritual interests transcend earthly ones, and as faith in God is more important than trust in man, so the question of the divine warrant and efficacy of prayer rises high above all personal or political considerations

whatsoever. And for myself I do not hesitate frankly to say that for more than three weeks past this has been my chief solicitude. Much as I sympathized with the President as a man; much as I commiserated his wife and children; much as I felt that the Nation could ill-afford to spare his strong hand from the helm, still more solicitous and more anxious have I been as to the result of his recovery or of his death on men's faith in prayer.

For never, perhaps, nay, never certainly before, was there presented so conspicuous a case for the seeming appropriate test of this agency of supplication. A man desperately wounded, so that medical science frankly confessed the physical probability of a fatal result; yet a man prayed for week after week by thousands. Making every allowance for the multitudes who only wished but who never pray, still the volume of prayer,—prayer called for by governmental summons, and prayer spontaneously arising from innumerable household altars and private closets; prayer as earnest and true as ever goes up from human lips, that ascended from our land to Heaven for the President's restoration was vast and importunate. And it did seem as if it *must* be heard; and not only heard, but *granted* in the precise terms of it. It did seem as if it would be a good time for God to give his witness—the witness of a direct and exact concession of the request—to the supplication of His people. In this age of scoffing and materialism, when the value of prayer is so extensively denied, it did appear that this was a grand opportunity for the confirmation of faith and for the silencing of cavil. If God wanted men to pray, now seemed a good time to show it. Almost it appeared (speaking reverently)

as if He could not afford, either for His churches' sake or for His own sake, to let the President die.

You perceive clearly enough that I have not only felt whatever of difficulty lies in this matter, but that I am not now disposed to blink it. No, I have felt it agonizingly. And instead of puttering about in platitudes on this occasion, I want for my own sake as well as yours, to face the question squarely.

Eleven weeks of prayer, from end to end of the land, for the President's recovery, and he to-day in his coffin! What does it mean?

My dear hearers, I do not undertake to convince myself or to tell you altogether what it does mean. I am not going to pretend to any lights and satisfactions on this matter which I do not fully discern. I am going to treat you just as I treat myself in this thing, with the honesty of a man who has his own faith to sustain, and his own doubt to silence.

I mention, then, as one consideration which it becomes me, and it becomes you, also, to bear in mind (and which we can none of us dispute) that it is right and wise for God to deny a specific request of His people, if He sees that the granting of it will be injurious, or that a better thing can be accomplished in its stead. This is a simple proposition, but it is a solid one. It holds, in principle, in parental dealings with children. The loving parent longing to grant a child's desire, lovingly denies the injurious petition, or even the petition which seeks a lesser good than can otherwise be had. And God ought so to do. And so He does, if the meaning of the great pattern and exemplar prayer uttered by His own dear Son be taken into mind. Christ prayed (in submission, doubtless, to the Father's will), but Christ prayed,

“Let this cup pass from me!” a distinct and specific request. It did not pass. His petition was denied. I do not trick myself or bother you by saying something else was given instead of it. It was denied. Why was it denied? It was denied because to grant it would be the loss of the whole enterprise of redemption. It was denied because its denial was the condition of a vastly greater benefit to the human race, yea, and to Christ himself also.

This instance is supremely and everlastingly instructive. It discloses the principles upon which God not only goes, but on which we see he ought to go in granting or denying our requests. He ought not to grant them if the granting them is either injurious or will prove the barrier to a greater good. And every promise on the part of God to hear prayer and grant His people’s request must be taken, and ought to be taken, in subordination to this plain principle (which rules even in our poor parental dealings with our children) of doing what is best. When, therefore, the Word of God says “the prayer of faith shall heal the sick,” “if two of you on earth shall agree concerning anything ye shall ask, it shall be done for you of my Father in Heaven,” are we to say that that promise shall have no possible limitations? that the sick man must get well even if it be better that he should die? that the request of the two should be granted, even if it is at the cost of loss to hundreds? Plainly not. Common sense denies. The promise must be taken, ought only to be considered as given, subject to the limitations of a wisdom which knows and does what is best.

How then does the matter of prayer for President Garfield’s recovery stand? Already we have seen,

under another head of this discourse, and dealing with matters on a far lower plane than this of prayer, that there is very considerable ground for the belief, from matters which are already under our view, that Garfield's death has done as much for his own fame and for the Nation's good as his life could have done. Already we have seen that there is no small reason to conjecture that his name will be held in sweeter remembrance, and the nation and the world profited more, dying as he has, a death which has moved the heart of the world in common fellowship — than if he had lived out a full term or a double term of official duty. And if this be the case (as certainly no one can deny that it may be the case) then God has done kindly in refusing to hear the specific request that the President might live.

Add now to this consideration one more. God takes time to complete His purposes. He doesn't balance His accounts every eleven weeks. He does not show all of what He does in three lunar months.

He has denied the importunate request of the Nation that the President should live. I do not go into the evasion of saying he has granted it in some other way. He has denied the request. A denial so conspicuous, of a request so earnest, seems (I speak it very reverently) seems to demand the vindication of a sufficient and manifested reason. I confess to a feeling (humble I hope, but profound), that there ought to be soon or late, and that soon or late there will be, a benefit obvious enough in our President's departure to compensate for the perplexity of God's ways in seeming to disregard these requests. And such obvious benefit I expect to see. Nay, the beginnings of it we do already see.

But since most of the benefits we already behold, appear as if they might have been gained by the President's protracted suffering and yet his final recovery, I therefore look for still further benefits which only his death could bring. I think this is what is only fair to expect. I think it may reverently be said this is what God may be expected in his own time to show.

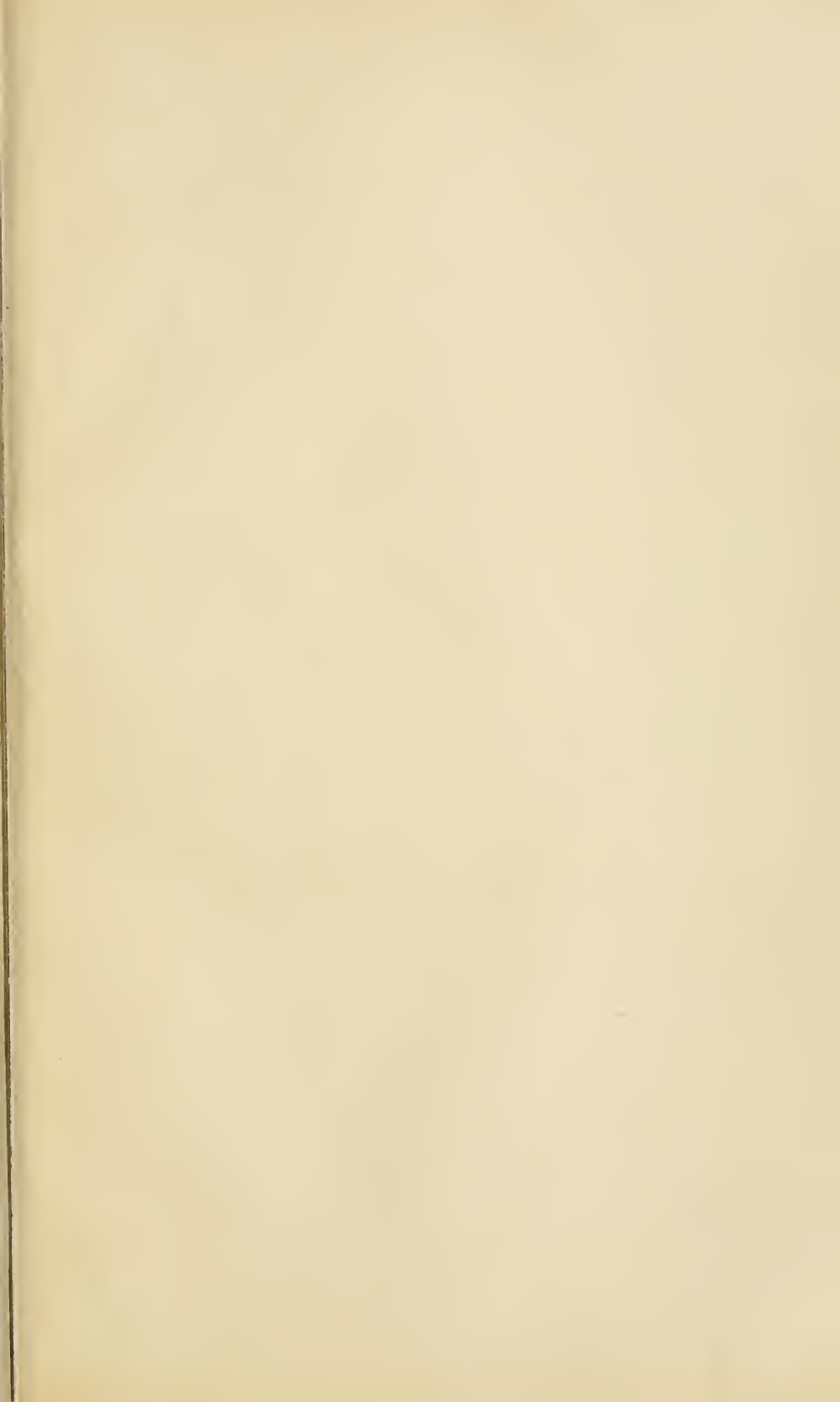
And so I say to myself and to you. Wait and see! God is older than we are, and he has not got through with this matter. Before the sod yet covers the President, is no time to weigh and decide on the full measure, of the results of the death we mourn. Wait and see! God may as well be trusted awhile longer. Wait and see!

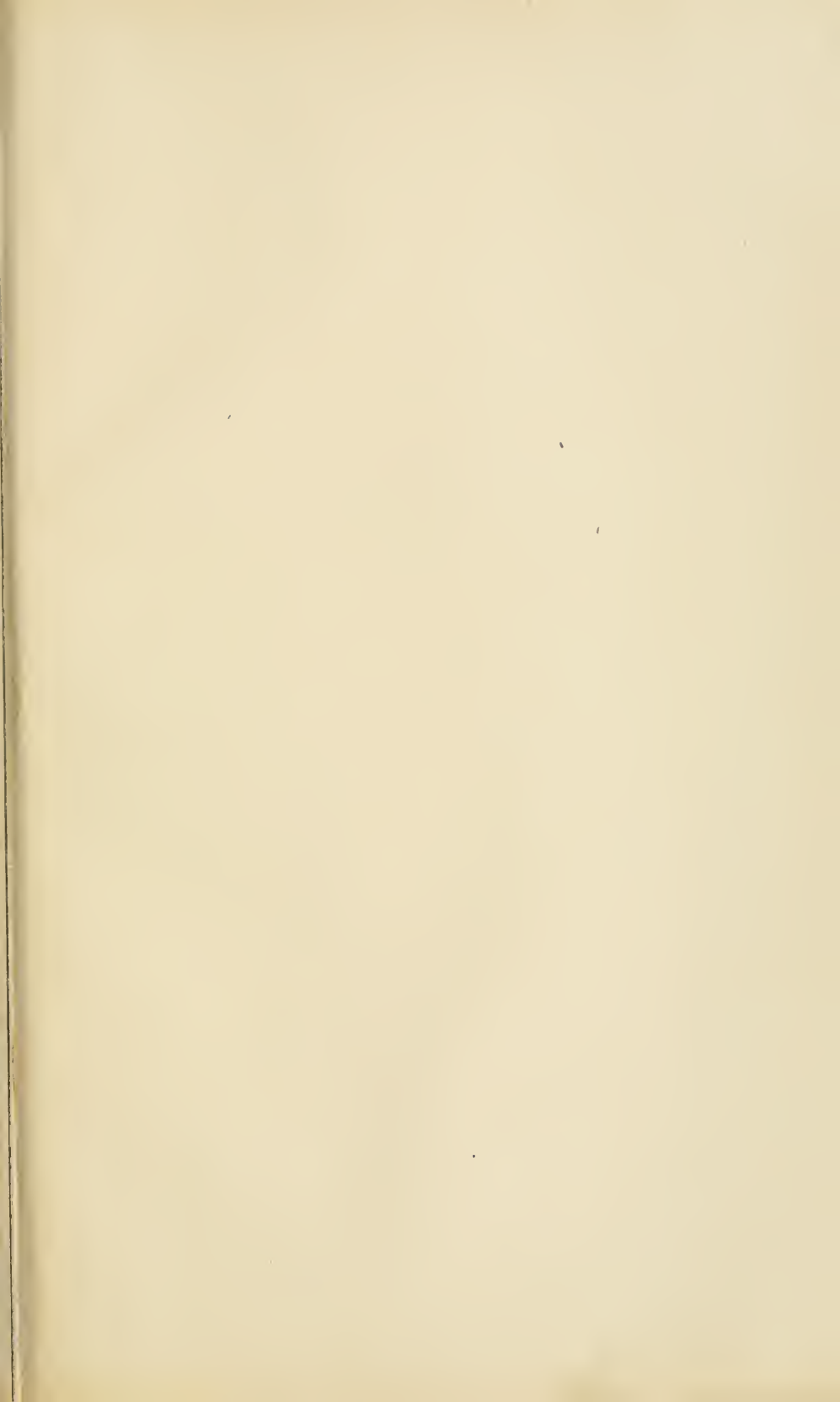
And now in hope and faith we turn to our God and to his God whose loss from us we (perhaps largely from our very ignorance) deplore. Well is it with him! Well also for us let us trust it will be. Our human hearts grieve after him, but our Christian faith must not despair. Sweet and noble man, farewell! Lovable and Christian soul, farewell! Scholar, Statesman, President, farewell!

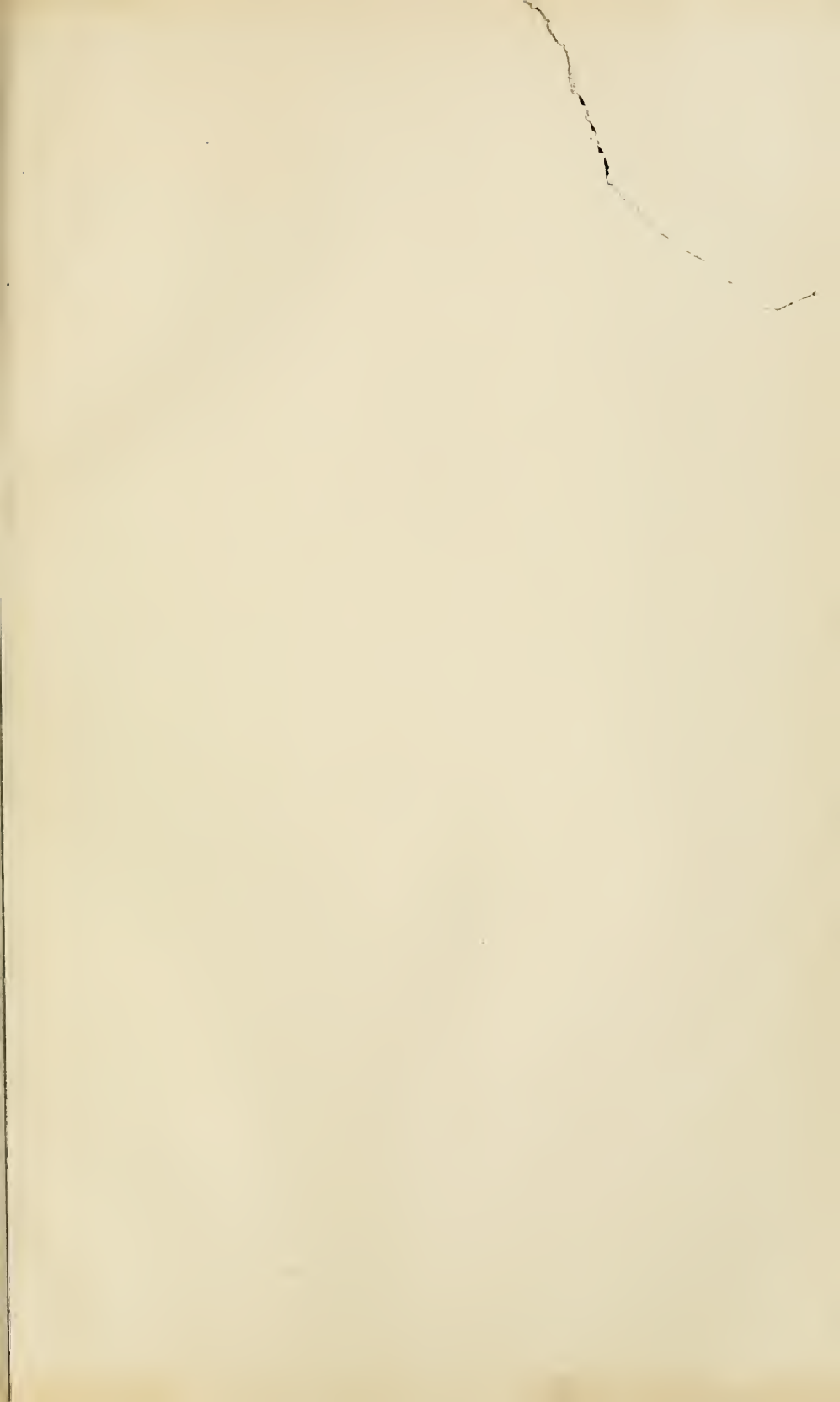
“He is gone who seemed so great;
Gone, but nothing can bereave him
Of the force he made his own
Being here; and we believe him
Something far advanced in state;
And that he wears a truer crown
Than any wreath that we could weave him.

But speak no more of his renown;
Lay your earthly fancies down—
God accept him: Christ receive him.”

AMEN.







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